



## **sweethearts (who sleep apart) by Kirinin**

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**Summary:** Nancy and Jonathan did most of their growing up when they lost those closest to them, and fought and (nearly) killed a monster together. Now is Steve Harrington's chance to catch up, if he can take it at a run. Rated M for Steve's potty mouth and suggestive themes.

## sweethearts (who sleep apart)

It was no secret that Steve had been head over heels for Nancy Wheeler long before the monster.

In chemistry, he watched her narrowed focus on the glassware and flame in front of her, snub-nose and wide, blue eyes and unreal lashes and thought *oh*, in a way that wasn't even a little cool or smooth. Nancy's gaze would flick to the other girl, her friend, what's-her-face, and then that brow would furrow and those lips would purse, and that intent intellect would zoom back in on her project, critically, and Steve's heart would do so many backflips that he was sure he was going into cardiac arrest, for real, he was going to die of love any minute, now.

*But now it's a million times worse*, he thought as he pulled up to Nancy's house to drive her to school. Now it wasn't so much palms sweating, and warm, gauzy thoughts of Nancy Wheeler up against her locker and pressing his lips to hers, feeling her up under that white, lacy top he liked so much. These days...

Nancy flew down her porch steps and pressed her whole body against his in swift, searing kiss... and for the first time since he'd woken in his big, empty house that morning, Steve's shoulders unclenched, and something within him uncurled, and his heartbeat slowed to match hers. These days, Nancy kissed like a soldier headed to the front, and Steve couldn't say he minded that things had changed, except for *how* they had. She drew back just enough to peer into his eyes, hand still cradling the back of his head, lips half-pursed in that *how-are-you-Steve-Harrington* way of hers, and he grinned, helplessly, under the light of it.

*Good*, he thought, *I'm better than good. Hi, my girl*, and blushed to think how stupid he was over her.

Nancy whirled on the spot to wave to her mother – always in the doorway, now, until Nancy reached the car, though Nancy didn't seem to mind it and Nancy's mom didn't seem to mind that Steve groped her daughter in full view of the neighbors.

Steve scrambled in the car after her, and she reached out her left hand and he squeezed it in his right – tighttighttight, like there were forces intent on dragging them apart, which was dramatic in a metaphor kinda way, *hang on, I've got you*, but also sort of literal, and then Steve turned the engine over and pointed the car Hawkinsward.

Nancy put some chapstick on her lips and, after tilting her head consideringly at Steve, smeared some across his lips, too. He shot her a thankful grin – winter was settling heavy over the town, and his lips were cracked with the dry air – grateful it was always-prepared Nancy Wheeler who was his girl. Nancy withdrew her notecards for the geometry test she'd been studying for all week, and whose ass she would kick so hard – *can a test be said to have an ass?* he heard in his girl's voice – *yes, for the purpose of this conversation, yes, Nancy Wheeler, this test has an ass, and you will kick it.* That Nancy was still an A-student blew Steve's tiny mind, though Steve's grades had held steady, too, what with the way she quizzed him all the time, to the point that Mrs Smith had stopped giving him the stink-eye just for breathing.

They pulled into a spot by the door – *lucky!* – said Nancy's wide eyes and small smile – and then she tucked her arm into the crook of his and they walked to her locker.

Jonathan was there, bringing Steve up short; Steve sometimes felt like he'd been punched in the face a moment ago instead of a month ago when he saw Jonathan Byers.

"Hey," Jonathan said, still smiling, and,

"Hi," said Nancy, and they were sharing a secret little monster-fighting-moment that he was almost jealous of before it suddenly expanded to include him, and then he just felt... antsy, itching just under his skin. Nancy opened her locker while she and Jonathan chatted about something to do with geography, a class he didn't share with them.

And then they were all walking to Steve's locker, together.

He didn't get what was so *strange* about it. Before the monster, he'd hung out with Tommy and Carol, and they were a couple, and he was

the third wheel a lot of the time. Whenever he didn't have a girl, anyway, which wasn't often. So it shouldn't feel so strange to have Nancy on one side and Byers on the other, except maybe –

Christ, he thought with a chill, as Jonathan turned to face one end of the hallway, and Nancy the other, once they'd reached his locker: they were *guarding him*.

Was he imagining it? It looked casual enough, if you didn't know what to look for. But if Byers were to have his way, he'd be standing next to Nance, not Steve.

What the *fuck*.

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"Trouble in paradise?"

Steve looked up to find Tommy leering over at him, Carol leaning up against the wall with an exaggeratedly casual slouch, like the less she cared about proper posture, the cooler she looked.

Steve snorted.

"You closed that locker real hard," Tommy observed. "Byers finally make his move?"

Steve blanched. "What?"

"Byers finally seal the deal?" Tommy pressed.

Carol popped her gum.

Steve suddenly imagined – against his will, in a there-then-gone-flash – Byers leaning over him, staring at his lips, Steve pressed, hard, against the surface of his locker, entrapped, and Byers leaning in and –

"Maybe he's got to wait for Nancy's permission to speak to us," Carol said meanly.

Steve blinked the image free. They hadn't meant that. *He* hadn't meant that. It was only something that had popped into his head

because of the fourth-grade English that Tommy H. spoke.

"Leave it," Jonathan said, suddenly by Steve's locker.

A repeat of the strange image flashed, unbidden, in Steve's brain. Jonathan's voice was quiet, steady, and Steve felt –

Steve felt.

*Oh*, Steve thought, wide-eyed. *Shit*.

"Seriously?" said Tommy as Jonathan claimed him by the elbow and dragged him away.

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Jonathan Byers in gym class was ridiculous.

Look, Steve knew, okay? – that Jonathan was *one bad dude*. He'd stood toe-to-toe with Nancy Wheeler and he'd rescued her from a carnivorous tree. He'd stolen his dad's gun and bought monster-fighting supplies with a totally straight face. And he'd beat the crap out of Steve who, up until that very moment hadn't known that his position on the social ladder meant nothing so far as physical prowess was concerned. He didn't think Jonathan had known it, then, either. Weirdest and coolest of all, when Steve stumbled into life-threatening danger, Jonathan had tried *so hard* – so *earnestly* – to warn him away.

So when he stood in gym class, shoulders hunched forward like a befuddled giraffe that had mistakenly wandered into a high school gym out of the savannah, it was hysterically funny how helpless he looked, only no one else got the joke.

Generally speaking, Steve liked gym. It was an opportunity to show off his floppy hair and his smile and his awesome arms, and hear the girls tittering and know just what they were thinking. Volleyball was especially advantageous: the hair flop and muscles as he leapt were like catnip to the ladies.

He didn't like the way the other guys shoved at Byers, he thought, heading towards the blossoming altercation. It wasn't Jonathan's fault he stood like that, even if it was hysterically funny. And he could

kick the crap out of Steve, so when they called Jonathan a fairy-boy or whatever, they were insulting Steve, too.

Steve wasn't a fairy, and neither was Jonathan. They both liked Nance. So before was a fluke or a weird – thing – a hiccough of the brain - because Jonathan was doing his weird, intense loner stare, only in Steve's direction, and it was. Normal people didn't look at other people like that, like they could see *into* or *through* Steve, except maybe Nance, with her *how-are-you-Steve-Harrington* eyes. Her *how are you, no how are you* really –

It was the same look, he thought, frowning. That was what made him think like about Jonathan: because that look from Nancy always followed a kiss, he thought. Steve opened his mouth to say, *hey, assholes*, just in time to get it full in the face with a stray volleyball.

Okay, it wasn't his best month.

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"...he's just asleep," Steve heard Jonathan say. "It didn't knock him out. I don't think he's been sleeping well."

Steve blinked his eyes open to the nurse's ceiling; a cheap, thin school blanket had been tossed across his knees. It smelled like mothballs and throw-up. Part of his face thrummed unhappily with every heartbeat, new bruises on top of old.

"Are you?" Nancy's voice chimed.

Steve closed his eyes again quickly, some instinct urging him forward. Jonathan probably wouldn't answer with anything real, but the chances dipped to zero if he thought Steve was awake.

"I do all right," Jonathan replied.

*Bingo*, thought Steve, and gave himself a mental high-five before he wondered why he got a prize for understanding what made Jonathan Byers tick.

"I know you do," Nancy said, low and soft. His girl got it, his brilliant girl. "Hey. Thanks for staying with Steve."

"What?" said Jonathan.

"Yeah, I know," said Nancy, and now they were totally over Steve's head. What did Nancy know? Why didn't Jonathan press her? Slitting his eyes open, Jonathan's body language was abashed, Nance's, understanding, warm.

They fell to silence. If Steve had been awake, he would've filled the empty space with noise. After a moment, they found chairs. Waiting him out.

"I'm surprised Mrs Smith let you out," said Nancy.

"She didn't," Jonathan murmured in that stealth-humor way of his, and Steve snorted.

"Steve Harrington!" Nancy chided, slapping him on the shoulder. "Were you awake this whole time?"

Steve opened his eyes swiftly, dramatically. "Only a little."

"Steve!" she exclaimed again, but she wasn't angry: he could tell by that little upturn at the corner of her mouth, the one that said she was trying very hard not to be amused. "Oh, your poor face."

"My face has taken worse," said Steve, only to watch the quiet pleasure in Jonathan's face flicker out like a light touched by the Upside-Down; saw the muscles in his thighs bunch as he prepared to flee. Steve reached for Jonathan's sleeve, sitting up. "It's a face that can take a pounding," he said, apologetically.

"D'you know there's a word for that in German," Jonathan said, voice soft. "Backpfeifengesicht."

"Gezundheit," Steve quipped, then froze as Jonathan's hand extended towards him.

Jonathan's gaze wasn't on his eyes, this time; instead, he was staring critically, worriedly, at the spot on Steve's face that throbbed worst. With one hand, he tilted Steve's chin to one side; Steve went with it, shocked and tingling with reaction, lips parted in surprise at the privilege of examining Jonathan's *taking-a-picture* focus so close.



"Hold on," Jonathan rasped, and turned to dig into the nurse's desk behind him.

When Jonathan retreated, the room snapped into focus and Steve realized it still contained Nancy, with a shock like icewater; with a shock like seeing your girlfriend suddenly pointing a gun at you, shoulder-to-shoulder with the creepiest kid in school. She looked almost as taken aback as he felt, but then Jonathan was back, up-close and personal, and it was as though he held some kind of Steve-shaped magnet in his pocket. Steve could feel himself leaning forward, thinking, *hands*, dizzily, and stopping himself before he swayed completely into Byers's space, a faint and wordless tingle of alarm all that held him back.

Jonathan's fingers splayed against his cheek with a shock of cold, and Steve realized belatedly that he was dabbing some kind of ointment there. He realized that Jonathan had known just where to look to get it, too, and that made him wonder how many times Byers had been in here with bruises and split lips, and want to kill anyone who'd ever touched him, starting with Byers's useless father and working his way up through all the jerks at school. If Steve could've traveled back through time and punched himself in the face, he thought right then he might've done it.

"There," said Jonathan, businesslike except for how his voice was always kind of husky and low like he was confiding a secret. He was capping the ointment, and Steve was getting his breath back, still reeling. Byers's features squinched one last time. "Does it hurt that bad?"

"No. No. Not anymore," Steve said, and Jonathan smiled at him small and warm.

"Oh!" Jonathan said in surprise, like it had just occurred to him. "Maybe I ought to've let you do that," he said to Nancy, ducking his head.

"What? Oh. No, no, that's all right," Nancy said quickly, and it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. "You take care of Will so well, you know? I'm better with guns than first aid." Now she already sounded sure, her own smile for Jonathan warm and

inclusive, and just as before, she expanded it to pull Steve in, too. "Mike'd say I'm the fighter, not the cleric."

Steve felt breathless and strange. "Good job, man," he managed to say, without sounding like he was totally losing his mind. *Good job, Harrington*, he congratulated himself, because this felt stranger than a monster in Jonathan's living room, and that was saying something.

Jonathan broke free with another one of those tiny smiles again, and Steve felt –

He felt.

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Steve ran outside into the cold air, jogged around the track to banish the shaky trembling running through every limb. As he ran, he thought, *I'm not a fairy, though*, confused and betrayed. He liked watching baseball, he smoked cigarettes and drank cheap beer; he'd fucked more girls than the rest of the boys at this school put together. And he *loved Nancy* who, for all her gunslinging derring-do, was demonstrably a girl, sweet and soft and curved in all the right places.

His guts roiled at the thought of her. You sick, twisted fuck, he thought to himself as he ran. You sick, *twisted* fuck. What, Nancy *goddamned* Wheeler isn't enough for you?

The look on her face if he told her, *actually I think I might want Jonathan Byers to kiss me, actually I might want him to press me into the wall, actually, I might like it if you watched* – was sickening. The way she'd look at him.

And *Jonathan*. Byers'd think Steve was fucking with him. The way *he'd* look at Steve, the way he'd tear up – Jesus. And after he figured out Steve was for real? *So this what you kept talking to me for?* Shit, Byers would look at him just like Nancy would. Even Byers wasn't this *warped*.

Steve stumbled to a halt, fighting back nausea, heart thumping wildly, like a rabbit thrashing in a trap.

On the way back inside, he saw two figures slumped against the wall,

and at a distance his heart climbed up into his throat – like Nancy and Jonathan had somehow been able to feel his distress like a beacon, and had come for him. But on closer examination, it was only Carol and Tommy H.

"Hey," he said.

"*Hey?*" Tommy pressed.

"Yeah, we're not *friends* anymore," Carol said spitefully, grinding her cigarette out with the point of her short heels.

"Hey, and maybe you were right?" said Steve, and it was as though he were staring at himself from miles away. "I think Nance is like, a witch or something," he said.

"Oh my *gawd*," said Carol.

"Finally, Jesus," said Tommy H., and offered him a cigarette.

An olive branch. Steve took it.

"Women control you with sex," said Tommy H., conciliatory.

"It's true," Carol confirmed.

"I knew you were head over heels for Wheeler, but when she slept with Byers? Man, I thought you had to be really whipped."

"Yeah," said Steve. But Nancy hadn't slept with Jonathan. It was Steve who was the slut.

"But *witchcraft*. Ooooh," said Carol, wriggling her fingers in the air.

"Don't be a moron, that was like, a metaphor or something," said Tommy. "For sex."

"How d'you explain Byers, then," argued Carol.

"Maybe he's a witch *too*," Tommy said. "What do you say, Stevie-boy, did he sex you up?"

"Dunno what your obsession is with Byers," Steve replied, taking a

drag of his cigarette. "He's nobody."

But Tommy H. and Carol were staring.

"Ain't *nobody* who beats the shit out of you and then's your best friend come Monday," Tommy H. said finally.

Steve heard the note of hurt in his voice and shrugged. *You wouldn't understand what he's like.* But he had to stop thinking about Jonathan like that. Somehow, Jonathan and Nancy – and Danger, with a capital-D – had turned his world into the Upside-Down, where he'd be happy to kiss someone who wasn't Nancy, *cheat on* Nancy, so long as it was with the creep who'd taken photos of her through Steve's window at night.

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Steve crawled into Nancy's window that night. "You're gonna be so disappointed in me," he said.

Nancy looked up from her small, white desk; notecards littered its surface. She smiled for him, rueful, accepting. "I expect it's part of being Steve Harrington's girl," she said. "Go ahead, then. Confess your sins."

Steve wanted to, with a surprising urgency. What he'd said to Carol and to Tommy H. had been cycling sickly through his head all day. He didn't honestly think she'd cast some kind of Upside-Down spell on him, not for a second. But he hadn't been lying, either, when he said that Nancy Wheeler held an inexplicable power over him, that he was a different person when she was around.

When *they* were around.

"I made it up with Carol and Tommy H.," he blurted.

She turned back to her notecards. "It isn't my business who you hang out with."

Ouch: that was *ice-cold*. "I called you a witch," he supplied.

Whoa, now he had her attention: both brows raised to her hairline, lips pursed. Still not honestly angry, but trying to look like it. "What

on earth would you do *that* for?" she demanded.

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Steve," she said, in tone of would-be patience. She held out her hands and he strode forward to clasp them. "It was a lot," she said, earnest and intent. "It's made things move awfully fast between us. For me, too, sometimes." Her big, blue gaze darted down to their clasped hands before flicking back up. "So if you want to take a break, get some distance, then —"

"No," Steve blurted. "I don't. Don't say that."

Her features softened further. "But if you want, we can just be friends —"

Then his lips were over hers, before he was aware he was surging forward so desperately. *Ha*, who's gay? he thought in brief triumph before all thoughts were subsumed in Nancy's hair between his fingers, her skin under his hands.

Steve opened his eyes later to find that he was tangled with Nancy Wheeler in her bed, in a state of half-undress. Fuck, he'd come here half-convinced he was breaking up with Nancy, but he hadn't lasted five seconds after engagement with the enemy.

He shuffled into his clothes, peering over at Nance's half-finished notecards; it looked like the ones for that geometry test on Friday. She was missing half of Modus Tollens. Steve finished scribbling and added a few more vocab words onto fresh cards and stacked them up on the corner of her desk, because she liked things tidy, and he thought that fucking her was nothing next to wanting her not to be pissed off that he'd interrupted her studying. Knowing how she liked things, wanting the world to suit her. Wanting her to wake up tomorrow with a small and secret smile just for thinking of him.

Steve climbed back out the window, trembling so hard he was half-sure he was going to fall to his death.

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Tommy H. and Carol were waiting outside the school entrance for

him. Carol wove her arm into his and whirled him back around.

"Where are we going?" said Steve.

"I found a cool place," Tommy H. replied, grinning a weird little grin that sparked worry down Steve's spine to sit low in his gut.

Steve wanted Nancy and Jonathan bracketing him, with a fierce desire that tangled his legs a moment, almost sent him sprawling.

He followed them off school grounds, but it was only when they began to approach Mirkwood that his nervousness solidified into a stone that sat in his stomach. "What...?" he said.

"Just c'mon, this is gonna be so cool," Tommy said.

Steve didn't trust them. Steve needed the curve of seasoned oak in his hand, nails hammered to the other end. Failing that, he needed Nance at his side with her gun. Failing that, he needed Jonathan Byers holding lighter fluid and his dad's Bic.

No. No, that was nuts. Steve'd made a promise to himself he wouldn't be so *crazy* over them anymore.

*Should I stay or should I go, now?*

"Guys, there can't be anything that cool in the middle of the woods," Steve tried, but then they were in front of a dank, dismal cave.

"Check it out," said Carol, and pulled him forward.

Battling monsters from another dimension prepared him for anything. So it was a let-down when Steve stumbled forward to find that there was an old, plastic cooler full of what he had to assume was beer, a few beanbags scattered around, and a tiny chest full of magazines and pot.

"Jesus," he said. "It's a party? It's a party."

Tommy H. eyed him, offered him a joint. "What *happened* to you, man?"

Steve sank into one of the beanbag chairs, thrumming with thwarted adrenaline and shaking his head at the joint. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try us," said Carol.

Steve looked at them. "Me and Nance and Byers almost died together."

"Whoa. What?" said Carol, forgetting to pop her gum. "Are you serious? You're serious."

"I'm serious," he said.

"Christ fuck," said Tommy H.

"After the three of us argued, I went to Byers's house to say sorry –"

"You what?" Tommy barked.

"I went to say *sorry* about saying his family was full of *freaks*," Steve said, hard – *who's the freak now?* – and went on after Tommy didn't reply. "Only Nancy answered the door."

"Ooooooh!" the pair hooted in unison, Carol handing Tommy H. a beer and taking one for herself.

"Yeah, I thought – well, I'm sure you can guess what I thought," Steve said, accepting an open beer from Tommy. "But her face. She was *scared*. I'd never seen her so scared before," he realized. Nancy's gaze on his as she drew her top over her shoulders – checking in, unsure, but not *frightened*. Never frightened.

"I saw she had a cut on her hand," he said, remembering it vividly, "and – and that, plus the fear – I thought Byers'd hurt her."

Steve looked up to find they were both staring, Carol clutching her beer close, Tommy H. with twitching lips, like he thought – like he thought Steve'd crack a joke – anytime, now – and he wanted to be ready to laugh at the punchline.

"So I bust in, the avenging boyfriend, and. And."

"And *what?*" Carol said.

Steve sifted through what to say. Nothing about the lights or the letters or the lighter fluid. "And. I can tell he hasn't hurt her. He's got a bandage over his hand, too. So they were swearing a blood pact, or something, but they weren't fucking."

"Witches," Carol whispered, clutching her beer and stealing a sip.

"Byers has a – baseball bat," Steve said. "With nails through."

"What," said Tommy H.

"And they're telling me to get out." Steve paused. "You guys don't understand. They're *shouting* at me to get out, that I don't know what's going on, I'm going to get hurt."

"Were they summoning a demon?" Carol asked.

Yes, Steve thought, surprised. "Kind of? It was already around."

"What," Tommy H. repeated.

"There was a – thing," Steve said. "It took Will."

"Will?" Tommy H. said.

"You know, Will, the Byers kid," Carol hissed, without taking her gaze from Steve's face.

"They were calling it," Steve said.

"Are you for real?" Tommy H. muttered, but he didn't shout Steve down or shut him up, and it felt good, really, really good to say it all aloud.

"With their *blood*," Carol confirmed, like it was all a cool horror movie.

"Yeah, okay?" Steve said, and took a chug of beer. "They – they had cut their hands to lure it out there, and kill it. Not that I had a clue at the time. All I knew was my girl was in Byers's house. And that's



when Nancy draws the gun."

Tommy and Carol were spellbound, now, and didn't say a word.

"She's waving it at me, telling me to run, that I don't understand, and that's when it happens. The monster through the *ceiling*. I run out – of course I run out, you would, too – and they don't bat a fucking eye. Wheeler and Byers, Monster Hunters," Steve said, shaking his head. "But then I think of when you told me I keep running away and, and," Steve said, shuddering and drinking again. "I go back in. Nancy is shooting the thing in its face and Byers is down for the count. So I pick up the bat and... *swing batter-batter*, in its big, ugly face."

Steve looked up into Tommy's and Carol's eyes. They looked... blank. It was hard to tell if they were buying this at all, so Steve had no recourse but to keep going.

"It's like we've fought together all our lives," he said, gulping. "Just that smooth: me and Nance and Byers, we catch it in a beartrap and light it on fire. Nance and Jonathan did all the prep work of course," he said in the interest of honesty, "they're the brains of the operation, but I – I helped them kick its ass. And nothing's been the same, since." He took a long swig of beer, throat working.

"You'd better be fucking with us," Tommy H. said.

"I'm not," said Steve. "And sorry about the woods, but – but a lot of shit went down. You two don't understand. I don't want you to. It wasn't all cool rescue scenes, you know? Jonathan and Nance are still all messed up about it, and I wasn't even there all along to help the—her. Nancy," he said, nodding to himself and taking another long swill of beer. He shuddered. "I'll never forget that fucking thing as long as I live."

"You've gone nuts," said Tommy H. "Nuts." But Steve noticed that he didn't leave or even lean away from Steve. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself.

"So when you said Jonathan Byers was nothing, you meant you'd saved each other's lives," Carol said flatly.

Steve shrugged. "I'm kind of messed up about it," he said.

"No shit," said Carol, and tapped her beer can to his.

"So I guess you don't want this," Tommy said, holding a camera aloft.

"Hey – that's," said Steve.

"We took it," Carol said, shifting in her seat. "We thought you'd like to smash it again. Give him the pieces. No, huh?" she said with a crooked smile.

Steve snatched it out of Tommy's hands. "Christ, Carol, this is a Hasselblad 500," Steve said, cradling it. "It cost a hundred dollars."

It was only when Tommy H. and Carol exchanged a horrified look that Steve realized what he'd done.

"Well. I mean, I – I took the other one, so –"

"Because he was being a little *creep*," Carol said.

"A total pervert," Tommy H. agreed. "He took pictures of *your girl*."

"But then he totally, like, saved your life, so..." Carol went on, deducing. "Omigod, you really *do* like him. You, like, *like-him*, like-him. 'Cause he saved you like a *damsel*."

"Shut it," Steve ordered. "If anything, I saved his sorry ass."

"And then you bought him a *camera*," Carol caroled.

Tommy still seemed too gobsmacked to say much of anything.

"Was it for Christmas? Tell me it was for Christmas," Carol shrieked. "Omigod, it *was*."

"He didn't know, or anything," Steve said. "I had Nance give it to him."

"You had *Nance* give it to him," Carol echoed. "Oh, wow, Stevie-boy. Why?"

"Cause that was less weird," Steve said, which was exactly what he'd told Nancy at the time. "And because she wanted something to say she forgave him, too. She chipped in," he said, defensively.

"Nothing will ever make this less weird," Tommy H. said, re-entering the conversation as abruptly as he'd left it. "You hear yourself, like, at all?"

"Yeah," Steve said, and drank a long, bitter draught. "Yeah, I do. I swore to myself I wasn't gonna be weird about it anymore, but I am. I'm weird about it," he admitted, and that felt good, too, cleansing. Suddenly, he was very glad he'd followed his old friends into the woods.

Carol rocked back. "Are you *in love* with Jonathan Byers?"

"What? No! I'm not queer," Steve barked.

"Just checking," she said. "No need to get your panties all in a twist."

"Fuck," Tommy H. said. "Have another beer, man."

Steve did.

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Later that night, Steve stood unsteadily outside the Byers household. The wall had been patched, but still looked a little funny from the outside. He held the camera cradled in his arms and told himself to man up. Byers was probably going crazy, looking for it.

He remembered this feeling. Standing outside, getting his courage up. *Please let me be able to fix it*, he remembered thinking, just before he rapped on the door.

He realized he was doing it now, hand rising mechanically, part of him watching from far, far away.

Jonathan opened the door; of course he did. It couldn't have been the Byers kid or Mrs Byers, which would have let Steve hand the camera off and run away. Jonathan's eyes lit on his face for a moment's hesitation before he visibly made up his mind to be glad Steve was there. The edges of his eyes crinkled. "Steve. Hi," he said, and turned

right around, expecting Steve to follow.

"Uh, hi," Steve said, easing into the house. Will Byers was seated at the table, and Jonathan had obviously made him dinner: carrots and potatoes and a little bit of meat. Cheap food but nourishing, healthy. It was a little shocking, all that wholesome normalcy, after an afternoon of re-hashing his monster battle with beers and his dumbass (maybe) ex-friends. "Say when," Jonathan said, pouring milk.

"When," said Will. "Hi, Steve."

"Hey, kid," Steve said. He liked Will. Who wouldn't like Will? He was sweet and sensitive and kind, with big eyes. He was a Byers, all right.

Who wouldn't like a Byers?

"How're you feeling these days?" Steve said.

Will looked up at him, smiling but solemn-eyed. "I do okay," he said.

Steve reached out and ruffled his hair. "Sure you do."

"Hey, my camera," said Jonathan, gaze traveling down to Steve's left hand.

"Yeah, Tommy H. and Carol took it. Sorry."

Jonathan shrugged. Steve set it down on the kitchen table. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Here, let me put that away," Jonathan said, picking it up and cradling it close. "I – I'm glad you found it. Got it. Whichever," Jonathan said over his shoulder, heading past the scorch-mark on the floor without even stepping around it. *So bad*, Steve thought, helplessly admiring. "I – I saved up a long time," Jonathan went on, nervously.

Steve realized all of a sudden why Jonathan was babbling. "No, I know Nancy gave it to you. She – we –"

"Oh," Jonathan said, actions stuttering as he placed the camera on a

high shelf. He turned; his eyes were wide. "That's – thanks."

Steve shrugged. "Anyway, I gotta go."

"Yeah?" Jonathan looked disappointed, but resigned. Like he hadn't expected Steve would want to spend time around him, but he'd had hopes.

"But maybe we could listen to a record, first," Steve blurted. "Looks like you've got a real collection, there."

Jonathan smiled that quiet, shy smile and Steve flinched. Jonathan peered into his face, cautious. "Are you sure?" he said.

"Yes," Steve insisted, though he wasn't at all. "Unless you've got somewhere better to be."

Jonathan shook his head. "D'you like The Clash?" he said.

"Dunno, I've never heard The Clash," Steve said, slumping until he was sitting on the floor, resting his back on the foot of the bed. Maybe this would be okay. He was nervous because of the thoughts he'd had, before, but he didn't want to touch Jonathan. He didn't want Jonathan to touch him.

Jonathan's jaw dropped. "Okay, no." He rose to his feet, popped a record on the turnstyle. "Totally not acceptable."

*Should I stay or should I go, now*, said the record. Steve lifted his eyes to Jonathan's.

"It's become our anthem," Jonathan said, jerking his head to his little brother, still eating in the kitchen. "Do you know what I told him when we listened to it for the first time?"

Steve's gaze followed Jonathan as he slouched down beside him. Jonathan rested his forearms on his raised knees and looked over at Steve.

"No," Steve said, quiet, gaze flitting over Jonathan's face. Jonathan had slouched awfully close to him, but then his bed was narrow, and his room was small.

"I said, 'you like what you like'. That you can't help what you like. That none of it's weird."

Steve blinked.

"Say 'when', Steve," Jonathan said, and leaned forward, slow.

*When. When. WHEN*, Steve thought but didn't say. He parted his lips to say it, or else he parted them because Jonathan was leaning in, staring at his mouth. He couldn't be sure.

And then Jonathan's lips were pressed chastely to Steve's, and then Jonathan's most earnest face drew back to gauge his reaction.

*Ohgod*, thought Steve.

And then Jonathan was easing back – *no!* – and then swinging a leg around Steve, bracketing him in just like he'd imagined, and taking the back of Steve's head in both of his big, artists' hands, and rising up on his knees and leaning forward and –

*Jesus*.

Byers kissed with the same single-minded intensity he used to line up a shot. Steve's fingers were tingling and his heart was thrumming in his chest as if Byers had reached inside with a crooked finger and plucked him like a guitar string. In his head, he was saying *when. When. When*, but the word had lost all meaning. All he could do was take it, Jonathan's hands and his lips and his *devotion*, like Steve was something worth cherishing.

Jonathan drew back, and the whimper out of Steve's mouth startled him awake.

"When!" he blurted.

Jonathan eyed him cautiously a moment, still hovering, before apparently deeming Steve wasn't about to bolt or hit him or cry. Then he eased off and bumped Steve's shoulder companionably with his own.

*...exactly who I'm s'posed to be... I don't know which clothes even fit me,*

said The Clash, petulantly. *So c'mon and let me know...*

"I've got to go," Steve said, jittering to his feet.

"Okay," said Byers, standing, too, sticking both hands in his pockets. "Thanks for the camera. Thanks for the... whatever," he added slyly, looking up through his lashes.

Jesus *fuck*.

He was supposed to be easing back from Nance; he was supposed to be ignoring Jonathan Byers. This whole world had gone *crazy*, and Steve was sliding off into a deep abyss, following after.

---

Steve didn't remember how he'd gotten home at all. He'd drank a lot with Carol and Tommy H. at the cave. That could explain it.

That could explain a lot of things.

---

He picked Nancy up as usual the next morning, and she flew to him as always. He accepted her kiss knowing that it might well be his last. The dread that rose in him was indescribable. How could he win the love of someone like Nancy Wheeler, only to lose it so fast? Only to lose it *like this*, because he'd kissed some guy? Even if that guy was quiet, kind, intense, saved-his-life-that-one-time Jonathan Byers.

"What is it?" she said, straightaway.

"I," said Steve. "In the car, okay?"

"Okay." She waved distractedly to her mother before swinging into the passenger seat. "Tell me."

He turned the engine over and pointed the car Hawkinsward. "I," he said. "I kissed Byers. Byers kissed me."

There was a beat of silence from the passenger seat. "You'd better not be messing with me, Steve."

Steve darted a glance to her: jaw firmed, eyes wide, lashes at their

most ridiculous: his girl. *Oh god, lie*, he urged himself, but weirdly, he wasn't that guy anymore. He didn't know if he'd recognize that guy if he saw him on the street. "I'm not," he said. "Messing with you. The Clash. We were listening and. He said 'say when', and he. Kissed me."

"Oh, *Steve*," she moaned. "Tell me you didn't hit him!"

Steve darted an incredulous glance her way. "What? No, of course I – Nancy, c'mon!"

She whooshed a breath free. "Good! Then *don't* tell Carol or Tommy H.," she ordered.

She still didn't get it. He was gonna have to spell it out.

"Nance," he said. Tried again. "Nancy." He took in a deep breath, held it. "I didn't say 'when'."

He could hear her whirl in her seat to face him. He could feel the whoosh of displaced air, too, and the more intangible weight of her incredulity. "So you," she said, voice cracking. "You don't *like* me anymore."

He pulled the car over, suddenly, just swung out of traffic and onto the side of the road. Appropriately, they were surrounded by Mirkwood on either side. "Don't," he said, turning to face her: still looking determined and raw, but with tears standing in her eyes, now. "Oh god, Nance, don't. Of course I still like you. I *love* you, so, so much."

It was the first time he'd said it... this was a bad time to mark a milestone.

"But," she said, swiping her tears away. "Then I don't understand."

Steve barked a laugh. Oh, god. Also not the time for laughter, if Nancy's scorching glare was anything to go by. "You say *you* don't understand."

Something in her face contorted before softening. "Oh, *Steve*," she said, clutching his hands. "Is it serious?"



"It's. It's like a heart attack," he confessed. "I. I don't know what to do, Nance. I don't know how to stop *thinking* these things. Tell me what I should do."

"Okay. Okay," Nancy said, eyes dancing with the speed of her thoughts. "We're going to work this out. We're going to be fine," she said, gaze darting up to challenge him.

He didn't see how, but he trusted Nancy Wheeler with his heart and his soul, so part of him couldn't help but believe her, despite all the evidence. He pulled back into traffic after checking his blind spot.

---

Steve made his way through Periods 1 and 2 like a sleepwalker, absorbing nothing.

*Should I stay or should I go, now? If I go, there will be trouble...*

Steve caught sight of Nancy and Jonathan coming to pick him up for third period chemistry. Like always.

*If I stay, it will be double.*

"Hey," said Nance.

*So c'mon, and let me know...*

"Should I cool it, or should I blow?" said Steve, aloud.

"You should cool it," Jonathan said, automatically, "and come with us," like it was a private joke and not some kind of Clash-induced Tourette's, and Steve shot him a grateful smile that felt like betrayal a split second later, under Nancy's eye.

"C'mon," said Nancy. "I have negotiated a cease-fire," she added, arm tucked into the crook of his, "and a treaty."

Jonathan shot her a fond smile, and Steve experienced a bolt of *that's my girl, hands off*, before realizing he no longer had a leg to stand on.

"Jonathan's all right with it, and I'm all right with it," Nancy went on. "The only question is you."

"Wait, what?" said Steve, because he still had no earthly idea what was 'all right' about any of this.

"C'mon," said Nancy. She tugged Steve off-course, and Jonathan trailed after.

"What? No, you've got a test next period," said Steve. "We've all got a test. Geometry."

"I'll make it up," Nance said, blue eyes wide, smirk playing across her lips.

And then they were in the darkroom, the door slamming behind them.

Steve gulped. "I," he said.

"Shh," said Nancy. "I'm here," and kissed him.

Her lips; her strong little arms, slender but corded with muscle. Her trim waist, the poke of her hips. How he loved that about her: her wiry strength. How her 'hush' quieted and calmed him, settled something wriggling in his stomach down to quiescence.

"Hey," he said as their lips parted. "I *told* you I still loved you."

She looked up into his eyes, let him see a hint of vulnerability, nodded. Drew back.

Jonathan was still there, watching them. His face took Steve aback, the tenderness where Steve unconsciously expected jealousy or anger or garden-variety discomfort at watching other people neck. Nancy nodded at him, and at first Steve thought it was an acknowledgement like, "thanks for this," but it wasn't quite that, because then Jonathan was stepping forward to take Nancy's place.

Steve only realized he'd stumbled backward when his back hit the wall. "Don't –" he said, and Jonathan froze.

Steve looked up to find that Nancy had gone white in the face. "I thought you..." she said.

Steve's gaze darted wildly between the two of them. Jonathan looking more and more crestfallen and horror-struck with every passing moment like he thought Steve didn't want – like he could possibly think that last night hadn't been – and Nancy's distress pinging off of Jonathan's, off of Steve's, an echo chamber of rising panic.

"I did!" Steve gasped. "I do. Come back."

Jonathan approached warily, now. "You don't have to," quiet and rasping, and Steve shivered. "You don't have to do *anything* you don't like."

Steve nodded. He knew that. Of course he did. He looked to Nancy.

"Oh, like you needed my permission last night," she said, crossing her arms over her chest and raising one dark brow.

"Nancy," Jonathan chided, but he was already stepping back into Steve's space, and then he was pressing his lips to Steve's. Steve looked over at Nancy, who was observing them with a look of frank curiosity on her face, a faint line between her brows. She didn't look angry, he realized, trying to place the expression, where he knew it from.

Chemistry class, he realized, suddenly. Trying to place why an experiment wasn't working out like she'd planned.

Byers drew back, looking frustrated, then pressed him more firmly to the wall, kicked his feet a little apart so he could *really lean in* and seemed to forget Nance was in the room.

*Shit*, thought Steve, eyes rolling back in his head as he closed them, if any of the chicks at school knew what Byers was really like, what he could *do*, how he could make a girl *feel* with his hands and his tongue and that earnest fucking face, they'd be lined up around the block to have a go. Thank god, he thought, that he and Nancy were the only ones who seemed to have caught on.

"Jonathan," he said, when the other boy drew back, *get back here*, and Jonathan went.

Jonathan moved to bite at his neck before Steve remembered Nance, and they'd gone *seriously fucking overboard*, and *damn*, was that Jonathan's pistol in his pocket, or...?

Steve snapped out of his hormone daze almost painfully, with an accompanying yelp. He looked over Jonathan's shoulder to find that Nancy was staring, lips parted, face a deep, embarrassed pink.

"Oh my god," she said. "Oh my *god*. Wow."

"Uh," said Jonathan, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"Seriously wow," said Nancy. "Definitely my turn," and strode up to Jonathan.

Somehow, Steve hadn't anticipated that since Nance had kissed him and Jonathan kissed him, that they might decide to kiss each other. He guessed he was less evolved than either of them, because he wanted to yank them apart so bad that he had to clench his hands into fists to keep from reaching out.

Steve liked pressing his advantage with Nancy, taking charge. Jonathan liked taking charge of Steve; he could tell. But weirdly, Nance took charge with Jonathan, guiding him into a sweet kiss that deepened until Jonathan *picked her up* and set her down atop the sturdy desk where they developed the film, pressing forward, Nancy's slim ankles hooked behind him, him necking her as she ordered him, *a little to the left, ah! Suck harder, yes, yes, like that, you're good Jonathan, you're so, so good.*

And when they sprang apart, Steve was weak-kneed and dry-mouthed and ready to fuck or be fucked, and he wondered why he'd been angry – and so scared, he never, ever ought to be scared of Wheeler or Byers, he ought to – he ought to –

He drew Nancy into a fierce, powerful, proud kiss – *my smart girl knew right away how to fix it* – and then Byers pulled him forward while Nance was loosening his trousers, and he suddenly thought they might get caught here, *they were basically in public*, he hadn't brought anything with him, and *how do two guys do it anyway*, and brought his hand down on hers. "When!"

They broke apart, each panting.

Nancy laughed nervously, patting her hair back into place. "I didn't think that..." she said.

"Yeah," said Steve.

"That was," said Jonathan, hesitantly.

"Yeah," said Steve. "Yeah, Jesus, let's do that again sometime, huh?"

---

They stumbled out of the darkroom back into the light and Steve felt like he'd just woken up from some weird kind of sex dream, except that he hadn't even come, and Nancy and Jonathan were still right beside him, blinking in the brightness just like him, dazed and horny and freaked-out, just like him.

"Oh, holy *shit*," said a voice.

Maybe Steve should've guessed that it'd be Carol and Tommy H. standing at the end of the hallway, just sneaking in after cutting first and second and part of third, Steve guessed. Jonathan stiffened, but Steve waved, lazily. "Hey, guys," he said.

They strode up to him, gawping. Steve grinned, feeling *all's-right-with-the-world*. Looking down, he realized his belt buckle was still half-undone. Nancy's hair was a wreck, and Steve could tell his was, too, even if Jonathan looked the way he always did except for maybe a little bulge in his jeans. Steve turned that grin on him before facing Tommy H. and Carol again.

"You've completely lost your fuckin' mind," hissed Tommy, and Steve felt his grin stretch.

"Yeah," he said, slinging one arm around Jonathan and the other around Nancy. Nancy elbowed him, but he didn't move. "And it feels awesome."

"If they've cast a spell on you again, blink twice for 'yes'," said Carol.

Steve laughed again, giddy and alive. "Thank you, Carol," he said

with a careful solemnity, "but that won't be necessary."

---

"So seriously," Carol said later, taking one, last drag from her cigarette before dropping it to the dirt. "Are you sleeping with them both, now?"

Steve grinned up at her. "If I am?"

"Then you're the horniest horndog to ever toot yer horn," she replied, but she sounded kind of awestruck.

Steve could work with awestruck.

"Then I am. Or I will be," Steve replied.

"Sick, Harrington. Just sick," Tommy H. said, but he sounded like he did when Steve said he was going to buy Nancy flowers and a teddy bear for Valentine's. "Hey, baby, you think we should be swingers, too?"

Carol wrinkled her nose. "You saved anybody's life, lately? 'Cause I haven't. Otherwise, I can't imagine being with anybody but you."

Tommy H. looked honestly taken aback. "No monsters, lately, baby," he said, flicking his ashes to the dirt.

"Whatta shame," said Carol, and Steve looked tastefully away as they Frenched.

In the distance, he saw Nancy and Jonathan sitting on the bleachers, Nancy's geometry notecards in her hands, features intent, Jonathan smiling, that lining-up-a-shot focus all on Nancy. A warmth kindled in Steve's chest and then starburst to tingle through his fingers, his toes.

"Have I told you guys?" Steve said. He raked a hand through his hair and grinned back at his friends, elation lifting him to the balls of his feet.

"I think I'm in love."

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A/N: So, I'm in the "for God's sake let them all be happy" camp. The title comes from alt-J's album 'An Awesome Wave'. I was very torn between using 'Tessellate' lyrics for a title (Three Points, Where Two Lines Meet) and 'Dissolve Me' (Sweethearts Who Sleep Apart). Definitely listen to both, because they're cool. The first link leads to a marvelous fanvid that has some pretty bloody images, so be warned.

Research: apparently, very few people in the US knew about The Clash yet, at this point - they were mostly popular in the UK. Steve claiming not to know who they are is obviously in part false (since he's humming the lyrics) but he doesn't know that the song he's singing is The Clash's. I'm imagining it playing from the tape deck in Jonathan's car and Steve overhearing it.

The Hasselblad 500 series was a pretty cool camera that was in fact available in the 1980s.

There are so many seeds in this fic for a future time-travel fic, which I will add if the muses are kind.

-K